

Testimony of Rep. Lou Barletta

Immigration and Border Security Subcommittee Hearing on “The Impact on Local Communities of the Release of Unaccompanied Alien Minors and the Need for Consultation and Notification.”

December 10, 2014

Chairman Gowdy, Ranking Member Lofgren, members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about my legislation, H.R. 5409, the “Unaccompanied Alien Children Transparency Act”. My bill would empower governors and local elected officials to control whether or not the federal government can place into their communities unaccompanied alien minors who entered the country unlawfully.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sent thousands of unaccompanied alien minors to communities across America following this summer’s border surge, including 660 in Pennsylvania, often without any notification or regard as to whether a community is prepared to receive them.

City officials in my hometown of Hazleton, Pennsylvania brought this issue to my attention after they had been contacted by a non-profit group about housing unaccompanied alien minors at a location right across the street from my district office. That’s how I found out – because an organization had called the city. The federal government didn’t tell anyone about the plan: not the Governor, not the Department of Public Welfare, not Luzerne County.

When I made the information public, residents of Hazleton expressed their concerns, and the plan was dropped. Had I not been informed of the situation by local officials, the plan would have proceeded without public notice.

We learned an important lesson in that episode: that the federal government is working with organizations across the country to place unaccompanied alien minors in various communities without telling anyone in the state or locality that they are doing so. That’s what prompted me to introduce H.R. 5409.

My bill would require HHS to provide state and local elected officials with a 30 day notice and comment period to determine for themselves whether they are prepared and able to receive unaccompanied alien minors. In particular, HHS would be responsible for assessing and informing communities of the cost and impact of receiving them. The Department must also certify that the unaccompanied alien minors have undergone health screenings, including

vaccinations, as well as undergo a criminal background check and pose no public health or safety threat.

It is critical that state and local governments are not left in the dark. Lawmakers must know who is coming to their communities, how much it will cost, and how it will impact their health and educational systems, which is why my bill gives local communities veto power if this information is not provided to their satisfaction.

I wish we didn't need legislation like mine, but unfortunately, my bill is needed due to the total lack of transparency by the administration following the surge of crossings over the southern border.

In fact, more than 66,000 unaccompanied alien minors crossed our southern border in fiscal year 2014. This represents a ten-fold increase in crossings by unaccompanied alien minors since 2011. Roughly three-fourths of them are males, age 14 to 17.

So we ask ourselves, what has changed?

What has changed is the enforcement of our immigration laws. In 2011, President Obama's head of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement released a series of memoranda announcing his agency would not be enforcing immigration laws against certain segments of the illegal immigrant population, effectively telling illegal immigrants that being in the country unlawfully was not reason enough to deport them.

Then, in 2012, the President announced his DACA program, which grants deferred action to certain illegal immigrants who claim to have arrived in the U.S. before the age of 16, and requires them to apply for a work permit.

The President greatly expanded these programs in his recent announcement to grant amnesty and work authorization to roughly 5 million illegal immigrants. He's telling people that so long as they make it into this country, they won't be asked to leave and will be rewarded with a work permit, Social Security, and Medicare.

I fear it will not be long before we see another massive surge of illegal immigration along our southern border. We saw it following the 1986 amnesty, and after DACA. Now, with the President's plans to expand DACA and his other so-called prosecutorial discretion programs, bills such as my "Unaccompanied Alien Children Transparency Act" are more important than ever.

Thank you.